

April 20, 2006

Mr. Edward Able, President and CEO of the American Association of Museums responses to Chairman Coburn

1. You mentioned that museum attendance is increasing. Can you please provide me with those statistics? At the hearing you described the period between 1988 and 1998. Please also provide 2000 – 2005 data.

AAM has periodically taken a snapshot of museum attendance. At the hearing, I noted the growth in visitation between 1988 and 1998. For the record, I want to cite the source of the information. The 1989 National Museum Survey documented a 5 percent increase in visitation between 1986 to 1988 with 566 million visits in 1988. In 1998, for an article in *Museum News*, AAM compiled seven sources of museum visitation data and arrived at an estimated 865 million visits.

Data on attendance for the period between 2000 and 2005 is from two AAM publications – *Museum Financial Information 2003* and the yet-to-be-published *Museum Financial Information 2006*. Using these results to project to all U.S. museums suggests a total attendance of more than 1 billion. Our best trend data for this six-year period shows attendance holding steady.

2. How can we get communities interested in museums and convince them to utilize them more?

I would respectfully disagree with the apparent premise of your question, as it seems to presuppose that communities are not interested in their museums and are not utilizing them.

For example, research from IMLS published in *True Needs, True Partners* documents the growth of museum service to our nation's schools, teachers, and students. The median amount a museum spends on K-12 education has increased four-fold in the five-year period between 1995 and 2000. Museums also reported continued increases in the numbers of schools, students and teachers served in that five-year period.

I could relay hundreds of anecdotes from media reports, museum directors, community leaders, philanthropists and the public of how the lives of citizens have been transformed by participating in programs and activities at their local museum. Recently there was an Associated Press story in the *Boston Globe* about the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Meet Me at MoMA." The program offers people with Alzheimer's and their caretakers a free visit and a guided tour of some of the world-famous paintings on Tuesdays when the museum is closed and at other times by appointment. A visit to the museum can provide mental

stimulation for the Alzheimer patient and a meaningful opportunity for recreation with their caregiver. Similar programs are available at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science in Connecticut.

Despite the harried and busy lives we lead today, people still find value in visiting and being involved in the activities and attending the exhibitions our museums present.

In my 20 years at AAM, I have seen museums continue to evolve to meet the changing expectations of their audiences. AAM will continue to share with our field ways in which they can better serve the public. A few years ago, we completed a three-year initiative, *Museums and Community*, which encouraged museums to re-examine their relationship with their communities and seek, with advice from the community and key community leaders, even more ways to engage the public. Museums have been able to accomplish this work in part through the support they have received from the federal government.

3. Could communities survive if we held museum and arts funding steady?

I would be hesitant to say that our communities would die if public funding for museums were held steady, but I would say that communities without vibrant cultural activities like those in museums are less appealing to our citizens, whether they are already living in the community or considering relocating or visiting there. The costs of running museums are not fixed; they are subject to inflation like any other business or nonprofit. Furthermore, our nation's museums are dealing with aging infrastructures, deferred costs associated with collections preservation and care, and the increasing demands of the public for relevant and inspiring programs.

From our financial surveys, we have seen a steady percentage decline in government funding – from an overall median 39.2 percent in 1989 to 24 percent from our most recent survey data in 2005 – as a source of income with the largest portion coming from state and local governments. It appears that museums have made up for that shortfall by increasing the percentage of their income from private sources. But, as I noted in my testimony, I am concerned that museums will need to spend even more money on private fundraising. Those that cannot find enough private sources of funds due to the lack of wealth in their community will be in danger of failure. Taken to extremes, we could lose the small museums that are so important in preserving the history and values in smaller and rural communities. If these museums cannot keep their doors open and care for their collections, they risk failure. If a museum were to fail, the collections they hold in the public trust could easily fall into private hands and never again be seen by the public.

Finally, the lack of growth in competitive federal grants has resulted in some institutions seeking alternative sources of federal funding by pursuing earmarks.

4. Wouldn't you agree that without competition as found in the grant process that earmark recipients miss out on peer review and other benefits that might strengthen the institution?

Competition for federal resources is not limited to the grant making process; recipients of earmarks also face a competitive environment in getting the attention and support of their lawmaker and the subsequent scrutiny and competition from other lawmakers' earmarks.

The competitive grant process can certainly help strengthen an institution's ability to present its case for funds so that it can withstand the scrutiny of peers. Pursuing federal funds through the competitive grant process with the limited availability of funds under the present circumstances can also be extremely frustrating and disheartening. After significant staff time has been invested in developing a project and filling out forms, many institutions with excellent projects are not successful. Despite the quality of the application and positive review from peers, many projects are turned away because there are insufficient resources to fund the number of quality applications an agency receives. Many museums choose to pursue earmarks because the resources available for competitive grants are so inadequate.

5. Do you think earmarks hurt the public's perception of museums when we see museums for teapots or a million dollar bus stop at a museum in Alaska?

We do not know the facts in these cases, and even if we did, we are not in a position to tell local people what their priorities should be. We do know that museums typically do not undertake new projects without carefully considering how this will provide an important new public benefit—funds, space and staff time are so difficult to find, and even when you get the funds, you still need to divert internal resources to making the project happen. And in the case of successful museum earmarks, the museum has not only gotten the backing of its board, which represents the local public, but also persuaded the lawmaker, who has many other worthy demands for the funds he or she could provide.

So I would hope that anyone interested in a given museum earmark would work at getting the facts in detail before deciding on the relative merits of a given project. And it makes sense for museums to anticipate where a project might create an appearance problem if described superficially and to proactively provide the background information that makes clear the public service need for the project.

6. In one of your annual reports you outline that for every \$21 a museum spends, they get \$5.50 back from visitors. Why won't more people charge or pay for museums?

There are at least two reasons why museums hesitate to charge very much, if anything (some museums still have free admission) for admittance.

The first is the nature of the service, and how we as a society see that kind of service. There are certain services that we as a society want to make available to all, without user fees. Those include such obvious things as fire and police protection, but they also include public schools and libraries. And there are others, such as access to higher education, where both the government, through tax deductions and federal loans and grants, and the providing college or university, through endowment, government support, and scholarships, subsidize the cost to students of a higher education, greatly reducing its effective cost to the student. The presumption is that these are such essential services to citizens, and to the future of the country, that we all should contribute something to making them financially available to most, if not all, of our citizens.

The second reason is the nature of the providing institution. Most museums are 501(c)3 organizations, set up to hold their collections, if they are collecting institutions, in trust for the public, and to provide educational services. Thus their missions are to provide those services as broadly as possible in society, and that implies maximizing financial accessibility, which in turn implies keeping the cost of access as low as possible.

On the topic of how much people are willing to pay: we know that people like to visit our museums; under our present admissions policies, we have more than 1 billion visits per year to American museums. We also quite sure that if we were to raise admissions prices substantially, we would deter many visitors, especially large family groups of modest means. Since museums in this country were mostly founded for the purpose of bringing education to a wide sector of citizens, and because of our ongoing mission of education, museums typically seek to exhaust every other possible source of income before raising admission fees.